

Travel Fraud

Time for a Vacation

Sunny beaches. Snow covered slopes. Who doesn't dream of the perfect vacation? Unfortunately, what looks like the perfect vacation can turn into the perfect nightmare. The Consumer Resource Center of the Attorney General's Office receives a great number of inquiries about travel and travel related services. While most travel service providers deliver what they promise, many do not.

Traditional Travel Planning

Traditional travel agencies can arrange for a wide variety of travel and travel related services including airline reservations, car rental, hotel and condominium reservations and cruises.

Traditional agencies procure travel and travel related services directly from suppliers such as airlines, cruises, hotels and car rental agencies. They can also secure these services indirectly through wholesalers or other agencies.

All travel sellers, not just traditional sellers, are required to maintain trust accounts for deposits made by consumers on travel related services. These funds are to be held until such time as these services are secured or delivered.

Problems can arise when a travel seller fails to maintain a trust account as required

by the Sellers of Travel Act, Chapter 19.138 RCW. If this occurs, consumers may find that the travel services paid for have not been secured by the travel seller.

What is a Travel Club?

Travel clubs are membership-based organizations promising discounted travel services, sometimes coupled with condominium rentals and/or camping resort privileges. Most travel clubs have joining fees and require annual membership dues. Many clubs with significant joining fees also promise rebates on travel booked through their club.

You may be familiar with some well-established travel clubs with good reputations. However, some travel clubs may promise savings that they are simply unable to deliver.

While travel clubs may be able to provide certain discounts to members on traditional travel services, you may be able to obtain similarly priced or even lower priced services through traditional travel agencies.

Travel planning through a club is much the same as planning through a traditional travel agency. The main difference is that you do not pay a membership fee or annual dues when you use a traditional travel agent. Travel club problems reported to this office include:

- Promising of large savings when in fact the savings do not exist or are not much better than a traditional travel seller could offer.
- Failure to provide prompt service to existing members.
- Premiums, like "free" trips offered in connection with sales presentations for travel clubs and services that are difficult to use or require the payment of deposits or other fees.
- Significant delays obtaining travel rebates.

Through misrepresentations of anticipated savings, service, and rebates, consumers can spend thousands of dollars on travel club memberships that they either cannot use or that will yield little or no reduction over the costs of traditional services.

REMEMBER: Some travel clubs have sales presentations which can be very high pressure. If you are not sure about the purchase, do not be afraid to take the time to think about club membership and evaluate the cost against your travel needs. Be wary of organizations that claim that you can only purchase a travel club membership at a certain "discounted" price today and who do not allow you time to consider the purchase. That discounted price may not be a bona fide discount.

Travel Certificates

Travel certificates are integral parts of the sales and marketing plans of many firms. They function as incentives for consumers to attend sales presentations. Some travel certificates purport to entitle the holder to free or steeply discounted accommodations, cruises and air transportation. However, in some cases the restrictions or conditions of use are not disclosed to consumers.

To generate sales leads, many firms place "lead boxes" in high traffic areas such as at fairs and in shopping malls. These boxes invite consumers to submit their names, addresses and phone numbers to become eligible for a drawing. Usually a telemarketer will contact everyone who submits this information in an effort to try to sell the sponsoring firm's services. In some cases telemarketers advise consumers that they:

- Entered a contest, or drawing.
- Have "won", or have been "selected" or were "chosen" to receive a "dream vacation offer".
- Must attend some type of travel "orientation" or sales presentation.

On attending the sales presentation, consumers are provided one or more travel certificates. While these certificates sound great, they are typically quite restrictive. The process of redeeming the certificate can be lengthy and frustrating. Generally, you must